



Some of the more intricate details of the historic carving are pointed out by Kohe Webster, left to John Burns, the assistant director of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

Mastercarver Kohe Webster hard at work restoring the amo carving.

Kikopiri Meeting House being restored

Decaying relics of Maoridom from the Kikopiri meeting house in Ohau are being brought back to life under the deft craftsmanship of mastercarver Kohe Webster.

The carvings adorning the finely-decorated Kikopiri, perched on the brow of land overlooking Te Waimarama Stream about 2½ kilometres west of Ohau village, south-east of Levin, are unique among meeting houses of the Wellington province.

The carved interior poupou fashioned after the East Coast style, are peculiar to Kikopiri. So, too, are the exterior three-metre high amo depicting the main ancestors of the hapu (sub-tribe).

The stout totara carvings feature two incurving horns on each side of their heads and are completely covered with rauponga (spiral designs taken from the ponga log).

Since its erection in 1859, many of the carvings — including the koruru (figure placed on the gable of the house), completely carved maihi (facing boards on the gable) and amo — have disintegrated with the passage of time and were recarved in the early 1920s by a tribe member.

Most of these replica carvings have met a similar fate to the originals, and today they are being skillfully recarved

by Kohe Webster from photographs taken of the original house.

Kohe Webster chuckles at one of the old photographs. "Must have gone to a fantastic dentist", he points to the koruru, mouth agape to reveal a set of perfectly dagger-shaped teeth.

Of the carvings, one amo, which had a rotted base as a result of the end grain being exposed to the damp, has weathered so badly to warrant restoration.

The other amo was so far gone that it was destroyed about 1935. The two amo originally represented the ancestors, Huia and Ngarongo. Huia founded the sub-tribe which bears his name, while Ngarongo has descendants in the area.

The restoration and replacement of the carvings is being aided by owners of the meeting house, the Ngati Raukawa trustees and the New Zealand Historic Places Trust which has contributed towards the cost and has also provided architectural advice for structural restoration.

The Trust's Maori Buildings fund is used to assist restoration programmes of historic meeting houses and other structures. Where requested, conservation and architectural advice can also be arranged. This is regarded as an important aspect of the Trust's work.

The carvings have been brought down specially from Kikopiri (a departure from custom) to the Maraeroa Marae in Porirua where the facilities for work on the carvings are readily available to the mastercarver and his apprentices.

The amo are steeped in the tapu system of ancient Maoridom. Karakia (prayers) and chants were recited before work began on the carvings by tribal elders in respect for their long-dead. Chips and shavings from work on the ancestral carvings are gathered, burnt and the ashes to be scattered on the marae.

"I wouldn't feel right if I didn't treat every part of them with respect," Kohe Webster says.

The influence of tapu on Kikopiri amo are well-authenticated, according to the Phillipps "Maori Illustrated Carving" book. In 1906, after many years, the badly decaying maihi and amo collapsed where they lay for some time before being sold in error. One amo was so far gone that it was eventually destroyed.

The book states: "Some years later the tribe determined to replace these carvings, and Te Roera, a trained carver, started to work on a great totara log. He had not progressed far when the mantle of death overshadowed him and the tribe mourned his loss. Years passed.

"For a long time the people debated the possibility of the new carvings being completed. A young man with some knowledge of carving volunteered to finish the work. All praised the young man and some measures were taken to avert tapu; but, coincidence or not, he died within two years. Nothing daunted, at a later date a carver came to lift the tapu and continue the work, but he too died before he could start. So not far from Kikopiri the log remains till time will reduce it to dust."

Today the dust is being swept aside to mingle with the wood chips as new life is given to the old carvings.